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CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
12 December 1985

US focus on aid to Nicaraguan, Angolan rebels

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Washington

On two widely separated diplomatic fronts, the Reagan administration appears to be headed for an escalation of support for anticommunist forces.

- It indicates that it plans to resume covert aid to the guerrillas fighting the Marxist government in Angola.

- It is laying the groundwork for asking Congress to provide more humanitarian and possibly military aid for the rebels in Nicaragua.

Both moves would be in keeping with President Reagan's broad objective to aid "freedom fighters" around the world and countering Soviet expansionism. But, in each case, diplomatic critics of United States policy question whether such moves would achieve the desired end.

The purpose of providing secret aid to the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in Angola would be to pressure the Marxist regime in Luanda to move forward on a plan for the withdrawal of Cuban troops from Angola. Another goal might be to prompt a withdrawal of South African troops from Namibia and hasten eventual Namibian independence.

A senior administration official said this week that recent diplomatic meetings with Angola were "positive in tone," and further talks are planned in the near future. He refused to comment on the possibility of covert aid but repeated the administration position that moves in Congress to provide overt assistance to UNITA would not be helpful.

Overt aid is viewed as complicating a regional settlement. It would also be dam-

aging because it would have to be funneled through South Africa, which poses problems for Washington as it tries to distance itself from Pretoria's apartheid policy.

Some diplomatic observers suggest that even covert aid, which US Secretary of State George P. Shultz initially opposed but now appears ready to back, would only escalate the confrontation in Angola.

Some concern has been expressed that, by aiding UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi, the United States may invite retaliation against its considerable economic interests in Angola and halt the Marxist government's drift toward the West.

"Both covert and overt aid are counterproductive, because it lines us up with South Africa against our own professed interests," says Robert Rotberg, an Africa expert at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It heats up the area again and will get the Soviets more involved."

It is speculated that the administration may now be using the threat of support for anticommunist rebels in Angola as a lever in efforts to convince the Soviets to pull out of Afghanistan.

With respect to Nicaragua, the \$27 million in humanitarian aid provided for the anti-Sandinista rebels or so-called "contras" runs out March 31. Under current law, the administration could submit a new aid request before that time and have it dealt with on a "fast track" basis.

Following Mr. Shultz's recent statement that the US might take "further steps" to help the contras because of increased Cuban involvement in combat operations, administration officials say no firm decision has yet been made on an aid request. But it is clear the administration is carefully watching the mood in Congress to see if there is now a greater disposition to help the contras.

"The administration is considering military aid," says a State Department official. "But it will not go forward if it can't get it passed."

The question is whether the congressional mood will change. Some observers doubt it will. But the election of a democratic government in Guatemala, the recent election in Honduras, and the continued viability of the moderate Duarte government in El Salvador seem to be creating an impression that democratic forces may be in the ascendant in Central America and that the administration can take some of the credit for this.

"Guatemala will have an impact on people's judgment of the area," a congressional aide says. "The general thrust now is somewhat more positive in terms of what the administration is trying to do than before the last vote on Nicaragua."

Experts say that, while US humanitarian aid has boosted the morale of the contras, the military tide has turned against them — because neighboring Honduras limits the area in which the contras can operate and has been holding back supplies, and because the Sandinistas have visibly improved their military operations.

Those who favor a negotiated settlement in Nicaragua say they think the US should provide more aid for the rebel forces only on the condition that they broaden their political support and publish a democratic political program calling for national reconciliation.

"There's more possibility for reforming the contras than the Sandinistas," says Robert Leiken of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

As the question of aid for anti-Marxist forces is debated in and outside of the administration, considerable uncertainty remains about US policy. In Nicaragua, the President has said he does not seek the overthrow of the Sandinista government, but he also does not accept its current "structure." It is not clear how far he intends to press for political change.

As for southern Africa, the administration's policy of "constructive engagement" has not yet born fruit. Many diplomatic experts believe the whole strategy needs to be reassessed.